When Our Words Return

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Published by Utah State University Press

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When Our Words Return: Writing, Hearing, and Remembering Oral Traditions from Alasak and the Yukon.

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Mrs. Angela Sidney, the Tagish and Tlingit woman whose multiple tellings of one story are highlighted in this essay, passes on an oral tradition that is both good to “think with” and a useful part of the “equipment for living.” These ideas echo Elsie Mather’s point that stories are a part of everyday life, recalled by events that cast them in variable lights at different times for each individual.

Both Elsie Mather and Mrs. Sidney recognize that oral traditions are of the present as much as the past. In the following article, however, the emphasis is not so much on the ways that events enlighten us about stories as on the ways that stories enlighten events. For Cruikshank, this is apparent in Mrs. Sidney’s differing uses of the Kaax’achgóok story to mark specific occasions in her family and community life. In this weaving of present and past events through narrative, folklore and oral history constitute a unified cultural framework for making meaning; they are inseparable.

This article speaks eloquently to issues of telling and listening to oral traditions, so its placement in the first section of the volume, “Writing,” may at first seem puzzling. There is, however, an important point made here about relationships between tellers and transcribers/commentators. When Mrs. Sidney had Cruikshank write down her story for different publications and audiences, it was one way to legitimize her tellings in relation to specific historical events. She used writing as a supplement to telling and a way of approaching a diverse but literate audience.

Whereas Mather and Morrow highlight the ambivalences in this process, Cruikshank demonstrates that a storyteller may sometimes use writing as an extension of voice. Mrs. Sidney not only told Cruikshank when and how to record her tellings but also patiently taught her the way to “mean” with stories. That Cruikshank so successfully conveys these layers of understanding
Yukon Territory, British Columbia, and Southeast Alaska, showing places mentioned in the text. Map by Robert Drozda.
to readers is a testimony to both of them and suggests a way that Mather's “monster” of literacy may at least be slightly tamed.

Ethnographies always begin as conversations between anthropologists and our hosts, who are, in turn, in conversation with each other. If we are fortunate, some of these conversations take unexpected turns, develop into genuine dialogues, and continue over many years. Dialogues open the possibility that we may learn something about the process of communication, about how words can be used to construct meaningful accounts of life experience. In this way, they differ fundamentally from structured interviews, where one of the participants claims rights both to pose the questions and interpret the responses.

It was my good fortune to have an ongoing dialogue with Angela Sidney, an elder from the Yukon Territory, Canada, for more than seventeen years. Our conversations began at our first meeting in 1974 and continued until the end of her life in 1991. Even though she is no longer able to participate actively in our dialogues, they continue whenever her words surface unexpectedly while I am puzzling about some problem, just as she undoubtedly hoped they would.

Angela Sidney described herself as a Deisheetaan (Crow) woman of both Tagish and Tlingit ancestry. Born in 1902 near the present village of Carcross in the southern Yukon to L.a.oos Tláa (Maria) and Kaajíneek' (Tagish John), she was given the Tlingit name of Stoow and a second Tagish name, Ch’óonehte’ Má. Her lifelong interest in passing on the knowledge she had acquired about the relationships between her mother’s Tlingit and her father’s Tagish ancestry brought us together. We began our conversation with a simple contract: I would record her life history for family members, and in return she would become my teacher—a role which intrigued her because it tested her pedagogical skills in new ways. As well as a brief life history prepared for family members in 1975, she was able to publish several booklets of narrative, family history, and place names which have been widely circulated in her community (Sidney 1980, 1982, 1983; Sidney, Smith, and Dawson 1977).

A witty, warm, and thoughtful woman, one of her chief intellectual pleasures was trying to convey, across cultural boundaries, the subtle lessons about human behavior she had learned during her lifetime. Since she was born shortly after the Klondike gold rush, her life experiences encompassed almost a century of startling institutional changes—the brief but turbulent influx of prospectors at the turn
of the century, the establishment of ecclesiastical residential schools, the involvement of indigenous trappers in an international fur market, the construction of the Alaska Highway, the development of an unstable mining economy, and the expansion of government infrastructure. But she was also intensely interested in changes that had occurred during the previous century. Her parents and grandparents had been involved in the flourishing trade between coastal Tlingit and interior Tagish peoples during the late nineteenth century, when Tlingit customs, clan names, and language were introduced inland. Her understanding of all these changes came from her lifelong attention to oral tradition. In our dialogues, she defined her task as one of teaching me how oral tradition continues to explain not just the past but also contemporary issues.

In this essay, I want to try to convey something of the process by which she used oral history to teach, because it so completely confounds any simple definitions of what oral history is or does. The central thesis guiding her work was that while oral tradition can indeed broaden our understanding of the past, it tells us even more about the present. Her concern about the importance of communication through storytelling underscores the value of performance theory in studies of oral tradition.

When Angela Sidney and I began working together, my own understanding of the term oral history was fairly superficial. I was delighted by our collaboration because it seemed to me an ethically sound way of doing research—it possessed a clear set of issues for me to investigate and a substantive product for Mrs. Sidney and her family. I assumed that I would be documenting details of social history as it had affected indigenous people in northwestern Canada, a perspective lamentably absent from most of the written records. My earliest questions were framed with reference to the Klondike gold rush, the Alaska Highway construction, and their impacts on the lives of indigenous people in the Yukon Territory.

Mrs. Sidney responded patiently but firmly, in each case suggesting that I begin by recording a particular story—perhaps one about a boy who stayed with the Salmon People, or a girl who married a star, or one about the woman stolen by Grizzly. Eventually, we recorded dozens of narratives in which a protagonist traveled under the water, beyond the horizon, or to the skies in order to learn about other dimensions of reality. Despite my initial sense that we were moving farther and farther from our shared objective of preparing an orally narrated life history, I gradually came to realize that Mrs. Sidney
was consciously providing me with a kind of cultural scaffolding, the broad framework I needed to learn before I could begin to ask intelligent questions.

One of the stories she told me was about a Tlingit man named Kaax’achgóok. This essay will focus on her retellings of his adventures in different contexts because she was very explicit about the way a single rich narrative can be used to convey a range of messages. Angela Sidney understood, as only the most talented storytellers can, the importance of performance—that it involves not simply a narrator but also an audience, and that narrator and audience both change at different points in time and in different circumstances, giving any one story the potential range of meanings that all good stories have.

It is important to hear the story of Kaax’achgóok in Mrs. Sidney’s own words. Briefly, Kaax’achgóok was one of the famous Tlingit ancestors of the Kiks.ádi clan. One autumn he went hunting sea mammals with his nephews, only to receive a sign that hunting was now dangerous for him and that he should return home. Reluctantly, he destroyed his spears and returned to his winter village, but eventually it became unbearable to him that his wives should have to beg for food and be treated with disrespect. Setting out to sea once again with the same nephews, he was blown off course and became lost. Eventually, they washed ashore on a small island. Kaax’achgóok spent the following months devising ways to feed himself and his nephews and perfecting a kind of sextant which could plot the sun’s trajectory as it moved north to the point of summer solstice. At precisely the day it reached its zenith, he set sail for home, using the sun as a navigational guide to chart his way. Despite his successful return, he faced the difficult business of acknowledging how much life had changed during his absence.

This narrative journey conveys some of the same power as Homer’s Odyssey, but to interpret its content solely in terms of the written text would overlook meanings conveyed by different tellings in varied situations. Mrs. Sidney told me her version of the Kaax’achgóok story in 1974. Once she was sure that I had mastered the narrative and understood the content, she didn’t ever actually tell the full story again in my presence. Instead, she made regular mention of it in our conversations in the same way that she referred to other stories she was teaching me. She used it as a point of departure both to discuss her own personal development and to interpret and connect a range of events that might otherwise seem unrelated.
After presenting the story in Mrs. Sidney's own words, I will discuss (a) her original telling of the narrative to me in 1974; (b) her account, several years later, of how and why she first told the story publicly; (c) her subsequent account of why she had the right to tell the narrative; and (d) her much more recent use of that narrative to commemorate a specific event in 1988. Her various tellings vividly reveal the way a skillful storyteller is able to use what appears to be the "same" story to convey a range of meanings. Each performance is historically situated, and the teller, the audience, and the intended meanings shift to meet the occasion.

First, then, the story as Mrs. Sidney told it to me in 1974:

This is a true story.
It happened on salt water, maybe near Sitka.
It goes with that song I sing—I'll tell you about it.

This man, Kaax'achgōok, was a great hunter for seal.
He was going hunting at fall.
He has eight nephews on his side, his sisters' sons.
Kaax'achgōok is Crow and so are those boys.
They all went out together in a boat.
Early in the morning, they left.
Fog was down low on the ocean.
He's captain: He sat in the back, guiding that boat.

He heard a baby cry that time, "Wah, wah."

"Stop. Listen. Stop that, baby, now!
Don't you know this is Kaax'achgōok's hunting ground?"
He listened quite a long time.
Here it was baby seal crying.
That's bad luck.
That voice even called his name, "Kaaax'achgōok."

So he told his nephews, "That's bad luck.
Let's go back."

They came back that same evening.
He brought up his boat, paddles, spears, and he tells those boys to chop it all up.
"I'll never hunt again."
He knows it's something. It's bad luck to hunt now.

After that, he just stayed home, I guess.
Anyway, he didn't hunt anymore that one year—
Stayed home all year until fall.
Maybe he goes out a little bit, but he never hunts.

Finally, someone else killed sea lion.
They invited both those two wives of Kaax'achgóok.
When those wives of Kaax'achgóok came back, he asked the
youngest one,
"Did they give you any fat? Any fat left over they give you to bring
home?"

"No, just meat," she answered.

Then he asked his older wife,
"Did they give you any fat to bring home? Any left over?"

"No, no fat, just all meat."

"How come they're so stingy to not give you women any fat!"
He thinks maybe his luck will change.

Next morning he asks his older wife,
"Go ask your brother if I can borrow his boat.
I want to go out just a little ways.
Want to borrow boat, spear, hunting outfit.
I'm lonesome—tired of staying home."

She goes to her brother.
"I want you to lend my husband your boat, spear, your hunting
outfit.
He wants to go out just a little ways.
Not far."

"Okay," he says.
"The boys will bring it over later this evening."
He's got eight boys too—
That's Kaax'achgóok's wife's people, Wolf people—they call them
Killer Whale on the coast—
That evening they packed over a brand-new boat—dugout.
Spears, oars, everything in there already.

Kaaax'achgóok tells those wives,
"You girls better cook up meat in saltwater for us."
Next morning those boys get water ready in sealskin,
Cook things.

Then, when they are ready, Kaaax'achgóok goes out again.
Not far, north wind starts to blow.
You know north wind blows in fall time?
Kaaax'achgóok thinks,
"Gee, we should go back while it's not too rough.
Let's go back," he tells his nephews.
They turn around.
Right away, that wind came up—they row and row.
Soon waves are as big as this house.

Kaaax'achgóok is captain: What he does, the rest of the boys do.
He throws his paddle in the boat.
Those boys do that, too.
Kaaax'achgóok pulled up a blanket and went to sleep.
Those boys, too, they sleep.
They went the whole night and the next day like that.

Toward the second morning, Kaaax'achgóok woke up.
He feels the boat not moving, but he hears waves sucking back.
He pulled the blanket down and looked.
By gosh, they drifted onto an island—
Nice sandy beach.

"Wake up, you boys. What's this I hear?"
It sounds like when the wave goes out, goes back.

Next-oldest boy looks up, too.
"Yes, we're on land," he said.
"Well, might as well go on shore."

Those boys run around.
They see a leaf like an umbrella—
It's a stem with a hole that is full of rainwater.
"Frog leaf," they call it.

"Eh, save that [fresh] water."
Each has his own sealskin water bag.
He looks around.
"Take your time.
Go back and see if there's a good place to make a fire."
They found a good place, sheltered from the north wind.

"Let's go there."
Big trees around there.
They make brush camp out of bark.
They carry that bark with them in boat.
Just that quick, they had camp put up.
Look for wood—lots of driftwood.
"You boys are not to run all over. We'll check all around first."

On the south side of the island, there's a rocky point.
All kinds of sea lions, seals, all kinds of animals.
When they're on rocks, the tide is out.
He thinks that's the best time to club them.
That's what they did.
Each boy made a club.
They killed off as much as they needed—
Sea otter, sea lion, seal.
Not too much—just what they can handle.
He told them to look after that meat good.

Some people say he was there over a year—
Some say 'til next spring.
He dreamed he was at home all the time.
"I gave up hope, then I dreamed I was home."

That's the song I sing for you.
I'm going to tell you about it and tell you why I can sing it,
And why we call it "Pete Sidney's Song."
I'll tell you that when I finish this story.

That man, Kaax'achgóok, he always goes to north wind side every day.
He goes out on the point—never tells anyone.
He marks when the sun comes out in the morning—
Marks it with a stick.
In the evening, he goes out again,
Marks a stick where the sun goes down.
He never tells anyone why he does this.
He just does it all the time.
Finally, that stick is in the same place for two days.
He knows this marks the return of spring.
Then the sun starts to come back in June, the longest day.

In the meantime, he said to the boys,
"Make twisted snowshoe string out of sealskin.
Dry it; stretch it.
Make two big piles.
One for the head of the boat, one for the back of the boat."
Finally, when the sun starts back in June,
He sees it behind the mountain called Tloox, near Sitka.
In June, that sun is in the same place for one, two days.

He tells those boys just before the end they’re going to start back.
Tells those boys to cook meat, put it in a seal stomach.
Once they’re out on the ocean, there’s no way to make fire,
So they’ve got to cook first.
They prepare ahead.
Sealskin rope is for anchor.
When the sun goes back again on the summer side, they start.

"Put everything in the boat."
He knows there’s a long calm time in late June when the sun starts back.

No wind—
They start anyway.
They think how they’re going to make it.
Those boys think, "Our uncle made a mistake.
We were okay on the island, but now we are really lost."

Row, row, row.

Finally, sun came out right in front of the boat.
Evening, goes out at the back.
Kaax’achgóok anchors the boat, and he tells those boys to sleep.

I used to know how many days that trip took—it’s a long time, though.
I was ten when I heard this story first—
My auntie, Mrs. Austin, told me the story first time.
Later I heard my father tell it to the boys.

Sundown.
They anchor the boat when it goes down on the steering side.
Next morning, the sun came out same way at the head of the boat.
He knows what is going on—
They’re right on course.
They keep doing that I don’t know how long.

Finally one time, just after the sun goes down,
He sees something like a seagull.
When the sun comes up, it disappears.
Evening sundown, he sees it again.
Four days, he sees it.

The second day he sees it, he asks,
“What’s that ahead of our boat? Seagull?”
They think so.
Where could seagull come from in the middle of the ocean?

They camp again.
It gets bigger.
Finally, it looks like a mountain.
They don’t stop to rest anymore!
Four paddle all day—four paddle all night.
Their uncle is their boss: He sleeps all day, I guess. Don’t know.
Finally, they see it.

Early in the morning, Kaax’achgóok’s oldest wife, comes down to cry for her husband.
That youngest wife, they already gave to another husband.
Finally, all of a sudden, she sees boat coming.
She quits crying—she notices how her husband used to paddle,
Same as the man in the boat.
She runs back to the house.  
"It looks like Kaa'achgook when he paddles!  
Get up! Everybody up!"

"How do you expect that?  
It's a whole year now.  
You think they live yet?"

Then he comes around the point—  
People all pack around that boat.  
They took him for dead—already made potlatch for him.  
So he gave otter skin to everyone who potlatched for him.  
Sea otter skin cost one thousand dollars, those days.

Then he sang songs he made up on that trip.  
He made one up when he gave up the oars.  
"I gave up my life out on the deep for the shark."  
That song he gave to Gaanax.adi people.

Then he made up a song for the sun who saved him:  
"The sun came up and saved people."

He made that song during winter  
And he sang it when he made a potlatch.  
Then that song he sang,  
"I gave up hope and then I dreamed I was home."

That's the one I sing.  
Deisheetaan people, we own that song,  
Because long before, our people captured Kaa'achgook's brother.  
When they started to make peace, he sang that song and gave it to us for our potlatch.  
Then we freed his brother. That's how come we own it.  
That's why we claim that song.

Layered Tellings

Narrative as Text

Angela Sidney's story of Kaa'achgook can indeed be written down and read as a text, one of many she told me in the course
of preparing her life history. When she first told me the story in 1974, her primary objective was to have it tape-recorded and transcribed in her own words. We read over the written text carefully and made the minor changes she suggested. At her request, it appeared in a booklet of narratives by three Yukon elders, *My Stories Are My Wealth*, printed for use in Yukon schools (Sidney, Smith, and Dawson 1977: 109–13). Once an orally narrated text is printed, though, it is open to a range of interpretations by readers as well as listeners.

There is no shortage of ways to approach the Kaax'achg60k story if we regard it simply as a self-contained narrative. For example, because of the thematic attention to the sun in Mrs. Sidney's version, it has sometimes been highlighted in Yukon classrooms at the end of June, presented as an example of indigenous perspectives on the summer solstice, a significant day north of the sixty-sixth parallel. Mrs. Sidney was pleased by this acknowledgment and even agreed to tell the story and be interviewed by a local radio station on June 21 one year near the end of the 1970s.

Given the structural parallels with *The Odyssey*, the story might also be seen as an example of powerful epic narrative. The hero's journey, constructed around disappearance, extensive suffering, and eventual return, dramatizes a theme common to much world literature. Like all good literature, the story addresses fundamental human problems. The psychological dimensions of returning home after prolonged absence were certainly on Mrs. Sidney's mind in other versions she tells, discussed later in the essay. The story of Kaax'achg60k undeniably constitutes a work of literature: bilingual texts of another version of this narrative, in both the Tlingit language and in English, have been presented in exquisite detail by Richard and Nora Dauenhauer in *Haa Shuka/Our Ancestors* (1987: 82–107, nn., 323–33), their first volume in a series entitled *Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature*.

Alternatively, we might ask whether this narrative incorporates historical events from "real time." Kaax'achg60k was a famous ancestor of a named clan, the Kiks.ádi Crow clan, and it is conceivable that his journey might be traced to an actual historical figure. The possibility of incorporating orally narrated accounts into ethnohistorical analysis seems to give oral history rather elastic promise, particularly when so much northern scholarship rests exclusively on written records. Yet exclusively literal interpretation of the events in the story would be too narrow.

Such diverse possibilities suggest good reasons for paying attention to the story of Kaax'achg60k as text, with a range of conventional
avenues for hearing its content—as a reflection of mythology, history, ethnology, language use, psychology. Too frequently, though, textual analyses begin and end with these questions. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us, there is a difference between what a narrative says and what it talks about (1979: 98). Had Angela Sidney not referred to the story again herself, I might simply have regarded it as just one among other fine examples of oral narrative from northwestern North America.

**Narrative as Gift**

Some years later, in 1981, Angela Sidney and I were firmly engaged in the process of recording her life story. By then, I understood that the dozens of narratives we had recorded and transcribed really did provide a kind of framework to which she could refer when she talked about her own experiences. Repeatedly, she explained choices she had made or advice she had given with reference to narratives learned from parents, aunts, and uncles—narratives exploring the subtle relationship between human and superhuman domains. Her narrative allusions and interpretations always added another dimension to whatever event we were discussing.

She talked about Kaa'ax'achgóok again on July 6, 1985, this time in a very different context. Her son Pete, then in his seventies, was visiting one afternoon, and although he had obviously heard the story many times before, she took the opportunity to explain, with him present, why it had such significance in his life. Pete was one of many First Nations men who served overseas during World War II, and she talked, this day, about how difficult his absence had been for her. "Five years he's gone—just like that Kaa'ax'achgóok story I told you."

During his absence, she said, she and her husband had bought their first radio, "so we could listen to where they're moving the troops so we would know where he is." When the war ended, her son sent her a telegram from Europe announcing his imminent return: "DEAR MOM, I'M BOOKED FOR CANADA. TOMORROW I'M LEAVING."

With a map, she and her husband calculated how long it would take to cross the Atlantic by ship. When he arrived in New York, he sent a telegram. "LANDED SAFELY IN U.S." They estimated that it would take four days for him to cross the continent by train to Vancouver. She allowed another four days to travel up the west coast of the country by ferry, and an additional day to ride inland on the narrow gauge White Pass and Yukon Railway to his home in Carcross, Yukon. "From the time he got on the boat from Vancouver, we're counting the days again. Well I'm counting the days—I don't know if the rest do!"
As the excitement mounted, her husband asked her how they should celebrate the occasion of his return. She described the feast she planned to give, the people she planned to invite. "'And then,' I told him, 'I'm going to sing that KaaX'achgóok song!' And my old man said, 'Gee, I didn't know you were so smart to think like that! That's a good idea.'" When Pete arrived home, then, his gift—the greatest gift she could give him—was the song sung by KaaX'achgóok when he returned home. "That's why we call that 'Pete's song': 'I gave up hope, and then I dreamed I was home.'"

But the story does not end there, because her right to sing the song was immediately challenged. Her narrative about how her clan had acquired rights to use that song, and hence her own decision to make a gift of it to her son, forms an integral part of the next version of her story.

Narrative as Settlement

Tagish people in the southeastern Yukon adopted Tlingit-named clans sometime during the nineteenth century. As on the coast, rights to use songs and stories remain firmly grounded in clan membership, which is traced through the maternal line. Angela Sidney, like her mother, was born into the Deisheetaan Tlingit clan, and her son, Pete, also belonged to her clan. Her father's cousin, Koolseen (whose English name was Patsy Henderson), was the senior living member of her father's Dakl'aweidi clan, and he challenged her right to sing the song at this celebration. As a relatively young woman in her early forties at the time, this put her in a vulnerable position. She recalled, "[He] told my mother, 'It's not you fellows' song, that song. You can't use that song!' He asked Johnny Anderson about it, and Johnny Anderson said, 'No, it's not a Deisheetaan song.'"

Mrs. Sidney explained how she demonstrated that the song had actually been given to Deisheetaan by the Kiks.ádi clan and that she really was using it in an appropriate way. KaaX'achgóok, she explained, belonged to the Kiks.ádi clan (which, like Deisheetaan, is grouped with Crow or Raven clans). Sometime in the past, a dispute arose between the Deisheetaan and Kiks.ádi clans. A Kiks.ádi man—"KaaX'achgóok's [clan] brother"—was taken by Deisheetaan clansmen as a slave in payment for an offense committed against them. As hostilities escalated, the two clans met and negotiated a conventional settlement. An exchange was worked out so that the Kiks.ádi man was returned to his kinsmen, and they, in turn, gave the Deisheetaan clan the KaaX'achgóok song. Because songs are
among the most important property owned by clans, the dispute was considered settled.

To confirm that as a Deisheetaan woman she was acting appropriately, Mrs. Sidney said, she did further research. She traveled down to the coast, to Skagway, Alaska, to meet with Tlingit elders there. She told two senior elders, Maggie Koodena and Bert Dennis, what had occurred and asked them to judge whether she had acted appropriately.

I told [Maggie Koodeena] all about how I sang that song when Peter came back and when I made that dinner for him. I called everybody from across the river to his welcome dinner, and I sang it before we started out that dinner and I said that Kaax'achgóok song was our song. And Uncle Patsy didn’t believe it. So I went to Skagway, too, and I asked Maggie Koodena, and she told me all about it. She told me about the war we made, and that’s how come he gave us that song. Kaax'achgóok made lots of songs. He made songs for the sun and he made songs for when he shoved his paddle in their boat, and that song he gave to Gaanaxádi. And that sun song, I don’t know who he gave it to. He just kept it for himself, I guess.

He [Kaax'achgóok and his clan members] gave that Kaax'achgóok song to us in place of his brother. That’s why we use it. That’s why I use it. That’s why I gave it to Pete when he came back from the army, because he just went through what happened to Kaax'achgóok. He drifted away in the ocean, but he finally came back. I asked all about that, too [before I used the song].

Narrative as Commemoration

Angela Sidney was forty-three years old when she first performed the KaaX’achg60k story and song in 1945. More recently, at the age of eighty-six, she decided to use this story again, this time in a very different public setting. By now, she was acknowledged as a senior elder storyteller in the Yukon Territory. She was in great demand as a storyteller in schools and had performed at the Toronto Storytelling Festival in 1984. She was widely credited as the inspiration for the annual Yukon Storytelling Festival. She had been awarded the Order of Canada by the governor general in 1986 for her linguistic and ethnographic work. At this stage in her life, no one was going to challenge her right to tell whatever story she chose.
When the new Yukon College complex officially opened in Whitehorse in 1988, she was invited to play a formal role in the ceremonies and to give the college a Tagish name. Although I was now living outside the territory and was unable to attend the opening celebrations, Angela Sidney and I met several weeks later, and she described her performance. To commemorate the event, she told me, she had sung the Kaax'achg60k song because it conveyed her feelings about what Yukon College could mean to young people in the territory.

Her audience was a very mixed one this time, including hundreds of non-Native as well as First Nations people from throughout the Yukon. It is not at all clear that the meaning of her story was self-evident to her listeners, but she was single-minded in her commitment to present them with something they could "think with" if they so chose. Because she could not be sure that her audience would understand her reasons for telling the story, we discussed the idea of distributing the text with some additional commentary so that others could recognize why she had chosen it. And so we did.

The reason I sang this song is because that Yukon College is going to be like the sun for the students. Instead of going to Vancouver or Victoria, they're going to be able to stay here and go to school here. We're not going to lose our kids anymore. It's going to be just like the sun for them, just like for that Kaax'achg60k. (Sidney 1988:9-16)

Commentary

With the growing discussion about indigenous knowledge, indigenous perspectives on history, and comanagement of natural resources in northern Canada and Alaska, there is sometimes a tendency to treat orally narrated accounts as collectible "texts" which can, in turn, be reduced to "sources" from which "data" may be extracted. Researchers pose questions about landscape, flora and fauna, history, ethnography, language, psychology, and social behavior. In their search for answers, they may look to orally narrated accounts, sometimes going directly to living elders, other times searching archival collections for material recorded in the past.

The implication is that oral sources are somehow stable, like written sources, and that once spoken and recorded, they are simply there, waiting for interpretation. Yet anyone who has been engaged
in ethnographic fieldwork knows that the content of oral sources depends largely on what goes into the questions, the dialogue, the personal relationship through which it is communicated. Oral testimony is never the same twice, even when the same words are used, because the relationship—the dialogue—is always shifting (Portelli 1991: 54–55). Oral traditions are not natural products. They have social histories, and they acquire meaning in the situations in which they are used, in interactions between narrators and listeners. Meanings shift depending on the extent to which cultural understandings are shared by teller and listener.9

The persistent idea that oral testimony can be treated as data is not so different from Boas’s conviction a century ago that the actual telling of narratives remained relatively uninfluenced by the observer and that the “native point of view” could be gleaned from recorded texts of myth and folklore. Two problematic practices have emerged from this assumption. First, as Dell Hymes (1985) points out, the words of a single speaker have often been glossed over in the name of an entire community, as though that person were merely some kind of information conduit. Secondly, ethnographers have normally gone on to assume full authority for these ethnographic products (Sanjek 1993).

If we think of oral tradition as a social activity rather than as some reified product, we can view it as part of the equipment for living rather than a set of meanings embedded within texts and waiting to be discovered. One of the most trenchant observations of contemporary anthropology is that meaning is not fixed, that it must be studied in practice, in the small interactions of everyday life. These meanings are more likely to emerge from dialogue than from a formal interview. In her retellings of this one story, Mrs. Sidney shows how she is able to communicate meanings that are both culturally relevant and highly personal. She readily acknowledges that her interpretation could be contested by other community members. She claims only that she has made every effort to present her interpretation as she understands it from her own research.

Angela Sidney’s use of the story of Kaax’achgóok actually demonstrates the way she uses narratives as a kind of cultural scaffolding on which to construct the story of her own life. It is one of many complex narratives she asked me to record after she had expressed interest in the project of documenting her life experience. As our work progressed, she repeatedly referred back to specific stories, interrupting her narrative with comments like, “You remember that
story about _____? Well, I told you that one already. That's the one I'm talking about now....” And then she would proceed to show how that story could illuminate some event which had occurred during her own life. Her construction of her life story relied heavily on this full range of narratives as points of reference (Cruikshank et al. 1990). Such stories, then, can be both culturally specific and highly personal.

Angela Sidney's various tellings of the Kaax'achgóok story remind us that there is more involved than textual analysis when we approach oral tradition. Her point, in her various retellings, is to show that oral narrative is part of a communicative process. First, she demonstrates, you have to learn what the story says. Then you learn what the story can do when it is engaged as a strategy of communication. Unless we pay attention to the reason a particular story is selected and told, we will understand very little of its meanings. Her point in retelling stories about Kaax'achgóok is precisely to show that a good story, well used, does not merely explain but also can add meanings to a special occasion.

Her tellings raise questions about the stability of story, narrator, and audience over time. After establishing the Kaax'achgóok story as one full of possibilities for interpretation, she made it central to three other narratives several years later. One of her stories referred to an event that had occurred more than a century before; another was tied to an important event in her own life, one which had happened forty years earlier; a third commemorated an event with significance for the future. In her tellings, there is no simple analogue between the narrative and a reified “oral history.”

But if stories are historically situated, so are narrators. Mrs. Sidney was very aware of the way her own evolving role as performer changed on different occasions. In 1945, she was a relatively junior woman speaking in front of elders who challenged her right to tell the story. The point of her next version, referring back to the late 1800s, was to establish her emerging ethnographic authority as she conducted research in conversation with her elders. In 1974, as a woman in her early seventies, she saw herself as a teacher, both of me and the “schoolkids” who might read her narrative. At her fourth telling, in 1988, she was positioned as an acclaimed senior storyteller in the Yukon, unlikely to be challenged by anyone, but also less likely to be understood by her heterogeneous audience. The net effect of her bringing the four versions together in recording her life history (Cruikshank et al. 1990: 35, 136, 139–45, 360 n. 9) was to demonstrate
how she had established the authority to tell and attribute meanings
to one story during the course of her lifetime.

Listeners change too, and Angela Sidney always had a careful
eye for her audience. Because she took seriously the goal of demonstrat-
strating her communicative competence (Bauman 1977), she assumed
responsibility for ensuring, at each telling, that her audience under-
stood what she was saying. The 1974 telling was for novices—for me
and “the schoolkids” who needed to learn the story outline. This was
very different from the 1985 version, told in the presence of her son
to invoke an event from 1945, his arrival home from military service
in France. Her son was an interactive audience; after all, he knew the
story well, but he also had his own version of the events. He kept
trying to interject and add details about his own journey. On that oc-
casion, though, Mrs. Sidney saw this as her story, and she intervened
firmly whenever he stopped to breathe. No one was going to inter-
rupt her telling this time! Giving him the gift of the Kaax’achgóok
story had been a pivotal event in her emerging role in her commu-
nity. Her husband’s delight with her intelligence (“Gee, I didn’t know
you were so smart to think like that! That’s a good idea.”) was coun-
tered by her paternal uncle’s disapproval (“It’s not you fellows’ song,
that song. You can’t use that song!”).

Her account about how she gave this song the name “Pete’s song,”
then, illustrates both the consensus by which cultures celebrate their
sense of collectivity and the oppositional process by which difference
and boundary are maintained (see Abrahams 1992: 48). The fact that a
culture is shared does not mean that all individual interpretations will
be the same, but it does guarantee that conflicting interpretations will
be significant (Siikala 1992: 212). Publicly challenged, Angela Sidney
conducted her own ethnographic research with Tlingit elders, who
confirmed her legitimate, inherited clan right to tell the story, sing the
song, and give such a gift. Part of her reason for insisting on retelling
the story in 1985 was to show her son (and me) that an audience of
elders, who themselves assumed the role of cultural experts about
questions of Tlingit oral copyright, had publicly endorsed her choice
in 1945. Her various audiences—those elders, her son, myself—could
appreciate and understand the role of narrative and song as statement
about clan identity.

In 1988, her audience changed again, this time to a very diverse
gathering attending formal ceremonies commemorating the opening
of the local college. Although Angela was pleased with her choice of
the Kaax’achgóok story to represent the symbolic importance of the
college for the community, she was quite sure that many members of this audience, hearing the story for the first time and lacking a context for recognizing it, would fail to understand her meaning. She recognized that effective communication of oral tradition requires more than performers and performances—it also demands an expressive community sharing similar expectations (Abrahams 1992: 47). She puzzled later about how to make her point in a different way; in other words, how to demonstrate her communicative competence to this very mixed audience. Eventually she concluded that it would be appropriate to extend our dialogue, reproducing in printed form the narrative she had originally recorded with me and adding a short explanation. We arranged for its publication in The Northern Review, a journal published at Yukon College (Sidney 1988).

In conclusion, Angela Sidney’s story draws on a traditional dimension of culture to give meaning to a range of contemporary events. During the years we have worked together recording events from her life, she has repeatedly demonstrated that she thinks and processes information with reference to the narratives she learned as a young woman. She has shown that she organizes, stores, and transmits her insights and knowledge of the world through narratives and songs describing the human condition. Her narrative is as much about social transformation of the society in which she lives as about individual creativity. Her point is that oral tradition may tell us about the past, but its meanings are not exhausted by that reference. Good stories from the past continue to provide legitimate insights about contemporary events. What appears to be the “same” story, even in the repertoire of one individual, acquires multiple meanings depending on the location, circumstance, audience, and stage of life of both narrator and listener.

Angela Sidney spent much of her life demonstrating the way this process works, and today younger women and men in her community continue to draw insights from the methods she used to teach. The words she used to end one of our dialogues one winter afternoon say it most clearly: “Well,” she concluded, “I’ve tried to live my life right, just like a story.”

Notes

Angela Sidney and I worked together for many years. This paper reflects our dialogues about one of the many narratives we discussed in
the course of compiling her life history. It is discussed briefly in *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* (Cruikshank et al. 1990).

1. In the southern Yukon, social organization was profoundly influenced by two matrilineal moieties: Wolf (Agunda) and Crow (Kajit). In those parts of the southern Yukon where there was considerable coastal Tlingit influence, these moieties were further subdivided into clans. Three clans named in this essay are Deisheetaan and Kiks.ádi, both Crow clans, and Dakl’aweidi, a Wolf clan.

2. I had already been living in the Yukon for several years by 1974 and had heard about Mrs. Sidney from her children, grandchildren, and numerous friends. Consequently, we already knew about our shared interest in oral history when we first met.

3. This narrative was also recorded by Swanton (1909, nos. 67 and 101, pp. 225, 321) and in Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1987: 82–107, and notes, 323–33).

4. In the version told by Mr. Andrew P. Johnson and recorded by the Dauenhauers, Kaax’achgóok relied on his knowledge of the stars and planets to find his way home (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1987: 95, 330).

5. To learn how she incorporated this into her life story, see Cruikshank et al. (1990: 135–36).

6. Oral copyright of songs, like stories and artwork, remains vested in clans; however, issues surrounding ownership of songs continue to be particularly sensitive. In their 1987 publication, the Dauenhauers note that Mr. Johnson specifically asked that the words to Kaax’achgóok’s song not be transcribed.

7. Compiled from discussions on June 4, 1981 (tape no. 387); June 22, 1981 (tape no. 390); and July 6, 1985 (tape no. 559). The tapes are located at the Yukon Native Language Centre, Whitehorse, Yukon.

8. This festival has grown each year and is now called the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, drawing performers from the circumpolar North and elsewhere.

9. See Siikala (1992) for a discussion of similar concerns as they relate to oral traditions from northeast Asia and the South Pacific.

**References**


Map by Robert Drozda.